

The Murals of Dagoretti: Examining Visual Communication and its significance on Social Change

Joyce Omwoha
Technical University of Kenya

The paper discusses how meaning is socially constructed through personal feelings and opinions, particularly in the context of interpreting images. Although image interpretation can be subjective, visuals have a significant influence on human reasoning. The study focuses on murals in the Dagoretti area of Nairobi, analyzing how these public artworks reflect the lived experiences of local residents. It explores murals as a medium for visual communication, their impact on social change, i.e. on shaping the behaviour and attitudes of the community. Field visits to various wards in Dagoretti were conducted, employing qualitative techniques such as content analysis and interviews. The findings affirm that murals play a powerful role in shaping community behaviour, in mobilizing and connecting people. However, the socio-cultural significance of murals, in urban spaces, is less appreciated.

Introduction and context

The significance of art and music, as expressions of a community's identity and heritage, is discussed by focusing on street art, murals and graffiti. Street art includes various forms of public artistic interventions that are often thought-provoking and accessible (Aquilani, 2023). Murals, described as large-scale commissioned artworks, transform public spaces with narratives and cultural symbols. They are created using traditional artistic tools like paint and brushes. Graffiti, typically unauthorized, is seen as a rebellious form of self-expression or vandalism, often marking or tagging property. The distinction between murals, street art and graffiti is debated, with some arguing that they are closely related. Street art, a rapidly growing and popular art movement, primarily appears in urban areas and public spaces. While it reflects political and social issues, it ranges from simple sprayed tags to monumental murals that define the character of neighbourhoods and cities worldwide.

According to #LiveInNairobi (2023) street art is vibrant and diverse, reflecting Nairobi's cultures and communities. "Nairobi has a vibrant street art culture, with a wide range of colourful murals and graffiti that can be found throughout the city (...) on the walls of buildings, bridges,

and other public spaces”. Johnson & Munene, (2022), in the *Africa Design Review Journal* explore street art as a form of expressive art for political change, affirming that “lacing visual art in Nairobi’s open spaces extends possibilities for social transformation (...) for publicizing protests and resistance movements, while creating public sociopolitical spaces of engagement”. Johnson and Munene single out American artist Joel Bergner and Kenyan graffiti artist for contributing to a peace narrative that was featured across all media platforms in the run up to Kenya’s 2013 elections. Their murals used a mixture of imagery and text (coming from the youth and community consultations) covering ‘tribalism’, corruption, unity, peace and reconciliation. Further, Gnana, S. K. and Rajendran, J. (2023) note that historically, murals have been used to tell stories, convey cultural values, and promote political or social messages. In recent times mural painting has gained significant attention for its potential to contribute to socioeconomic development. Murals are visually captivating forms of public art due to their size and accessibility. Gacheru’s article *Grffiti art spreads all over Nairobi* (2021) decries the lack of documentation of Kenyan graffiti artists yet they have been painting since the 1970s.

Although murals are seen as cultural expressions that celebrate identity and tradition, those selected for this study were painted by non-specialists, and are analysed to gauge their impact on social change and how they shape the behaviour and attitudes of the Dagoretti community.

Methodology

This study sought to identify the communicative and transformative power of murals, and their expressive, creative and evocative qualities in Dagoretti Constituency with a focus on Kawangware and Kabiro wards. The study employed qualitative techniques (content analysis of 8 murals), with Focus Group Discussions (FDG) and interviews to provide deeper insights into the reasons behind certain behaviors and attitudes by community members, analyzing the various elements contributing to the creation, significance, and impact of murals in urban Dagoretti. Data was collected through murals (8) accessed on various walls around Muslim, Soko Mjinga and Msalaba as some of the areas that featured most murals. One FGD was carried out with 8 community members aged between 18-34 and one key informant, Mr. John Mwangi, Director of Voice of Dagoretti (popularly known as Voice of Dago, CBO). Voice of Dagoretti is a Community Based Organization (CBO) that uses youth talent to

change the community through advocacy, activism and peer mentoring. The choice of the study sample (18-34) was based on our pilot study that revealed that murals speak mostly to the youth. This study defined the youth according to Article 260 of Kenya's Constitution which defines a Youth as a person aged between eighteen (18) years and thirty four (34) years.

Findings

As much as murals are large-scale public artworks that often carry powerful messages and beautify the urban landscape; the ones in Dagoretti lacked the aesthetic aspect; because, unlike Dagoretti artisans, mural artists work voluntarily and do not derive any income or tourists to the area. Mural paintings can be seen as both an expression of the people, as well as other people's representation of them, and therefore creating a shift in the power of representation. Alleyne and Brint referred by Waterton E. and Smith, L. (2010), *The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage*, p 7. A male Dagoretti resident (31) remarked that “*ordinary people's lives are communicated through the murals.*” In an interview carried out with Mr. John, while speaking about who works on the murals of Dagoretti, he affirmed that most artists who have commercialized their skill, do so on canvas. Mr. John notes too that art empowers the youth in Dagoretti by giving them a platform to share their stories and influence their environment. The FGD with community members (the youth who are also the artists of the murals, community leaders and residents) , revealed that art fosters a sense of unity and pride; advocates for change and brings attention to the challenges faced by the community.

From the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) that I held with 8 community members aged between 20-35, the following sentiments were expressed:

A 30 year old lady noted that “*When community members are involved in creating ideas about murals and are allowed to design and paint the murals; it encourages community participation and fosters a sense of ownership and pride among residents*”.

A 26 year old male concurs by highlighting that “the murals are canvas for social expression, as they enable people to tackle social situations well”.

A young mother (20) noted that “.....mural paintings are a tool for change, if someone had told me about domestic violence, I would not have stayed in an abusive marriage for 2 years. The murals gave me information about where to seek help.”

Controversies over mural's placement and messages have not been witnessed in Dagoretti, this is because the community's culture dictates that the only murals accepted are those that do not attract conflict, are not vulgar and speak to developmental aspects of Dagoretti. Permissions are sought so that community ethics are maintained.

Below are the murals selected for this study

Muungano Wanavijiji



Fig. 1. A mural aiming at educating community members about climate change and its impacts. The mural is in Kabiro Ward, Dagoretti North Constituency. Photo taken on April 2024.

Young Imm Kang Song, and Jo Ann Gammel further discuss perspectives of mural painting, and community art in the article *Ecological Mural as Community Reconnection*. Based on a specific context, the authors find patterns where the murals can serve as effective tools to create awareness of environmental issues in local communities. The text on the mural (Fig.1) - *Muungano Wanavijiji* translated to English reads: A union of community/village members. Here, community members have come together to speak about climate change and it's effects to their lives. The image of the world appears sad, this depicts the state of the world as affected by climate change. The dull colors used to draw the tree stump (illustrating deforestation) and the smoke from the locomotive (illustrating air pollution); all cause global warming, a major cause of climate change.

The text *Mazingira yetu jukumu letu* translated to English reads: Our environment our responsibility. Here, community members are called upon to take care of the environment they live in. Knowledge of and understanding climate change is important in the world today because it helps young people to understand and tackle the consequences of global warming, encourages them to change their behaviour and helps them to adapt to what is already a global emergency.

Mental Health Mtaani



Fig. 2. A mural on mental health. The mural is in Kabiro Ward, Dagoretti North Constituency. Photo taken on April 2024.

The text on the mural (Fig.2) – Mental Health *Mtaani* translated to English reads: Mental Health in the neighbourhood. Murals as methods to reach out to people in the community is manifested in this mural. Where imagery has been used vividly through words, which creates visual representations in the mind of the audience. While it evokes emotions about mental health (by using words like: anxiety, pain, suicide, fear, anxiety, depression) the

main message is conveyed by the taped mouth, The message being that the youth need to speak out on any of the stated states of mind. Speaking helps to end mental health stigma. This particular mural was sponsored by The Voice of Dagoretti CBO. The Director, Mr. Mwangi notes that the purpose of this mural was to encourage the young people to speak up so that their issues can be identified and addressed. Mwangi observed that many young people in Dagoretti have been resorting to drugs as a coping mechanism, instead of speaking up and getting help. These expressions strengthen youth bonds and inspire hope and resilience. They portray positive messages and aspirations for a better future.

Wezesha young mothers



Fig. 3. The Aim of the Mural is to encourage the community to report Gender based violence cases. And be courageous enough to speak out about various challenges and issues they are going through. It also focuses on empowering young mothers in the informal settlement. The mural is in Kabiro Ward, Dagoretti North Constituency. Photo taken on April 2024.

Shane Grammer Arts (2024) discuss how artists, armed with brushes and creativity, become agents of change, giving neglected walls a new lease on life. Murals transcend mere art; they become conduits for hope, expression, and revitalization. The text on the mural (Fig.3) - *Wezesha* Young Mothers translated to English reads: Empower young mothers. Other text on the wall note Sexual and Gender Based violence, mental health, *inua ndoto* (lift up the dream) are issues that affect young mothers in the society that need societal intervention. This mural is for all members of the community

to help fight systematic and cultural barriers that prevent young mothers in urban areas from being successful.

The photo above illustrates the community's anger over gender disparities manifested in the community. It shows protest over the matters mentioned (Sexual and Gender Based Violence, Climate justice etc, that affects women).

Visit the nearest health clinic for all health services



Fig. 4. The Aim of the Mural is to educate the community about communicable diseases such as COVID. The mural is in Msalaba, Dagoretti North Constituency. Photo taken on April 2024.

Murals as methods for raising awareness are depicted in the above mural (Fig. 4.) urging community members to visit the nearest health clinic for all health services. These services include; Laboratory services, Clinical and emergency services, Occupational therapy, nutrition health, Prevention and control of HIV and AIDs, etc. A 28 year old male revealed (in FDG) that “....this particular mural made me visit the clinic to get HIV testing and I encouraged my partner to get family planning services.

Nisome



Fig. 5. The Mural aims at stimulating conversations about teenage pregnancies and encourage parents to engage in similar conversations with their children. The mural is in Muslim area, Dagoretti North Constituency. Photo taken on April 2024.

The text on the mural (Fig.5) - *Nisome* translated to English reads: Allow me to have an education. *Chanzo cha mimba kwa watoto ni nini?* translated to English reads: What is the source of child pregnancies? *Wazazi kutowashauri watoto* translated to English reads: Parents not advising their children. *Tuwashauri* translated to English reads: Lets advise them. This mural depicts the inhabitants' diverse experiences. Their daily life is conveyed, and reflected through this; these are; child/teenage pregnancies, girls dropping out of school and poor parenting.

Komesha Vurugu, Dumisha Amani



Fig. 6. The Mural urges the residents to maintain peace during and after Kenya's general elections. The mural is in Soko Mjinga, Dagoretti North Constituency. Photo taken on April 2024.

The text on the mural (Fig.6) - *Komesha Vurugu, Dumisha Amani* translated to English reads: End violence, Maintain Peace. The Mural urges the residents to maintain peace during and after Kenya's general elections. Maintaining peace in Kenya has always been problematic because politics in Kenya has been ethnicized, with parties coalescing around ethnic power barons. Dagoretti is a cosmopolitan space, inhabited by people from various ethnic communities, hence a potential hotbed for political violence. This mural urges everyone to maintain peace no matter their political affiliation.

Tiba ni sisi



Fig. 7. The Mural encourages the community to take caution during the COVID pandemic. The mural is in Muslim area, Dagoretti North Constituency. Photo taken on April 2024.

The text on the mural (Fig.7) - *Tiba ni sisi* translated to English reads: The cure is us. The Mural encourages the community to be cautious during the COVID pandemic. Here, community responsibility is sought to reduce direct contact with other people to reduce chances of infection; education on COVID-19 vaccines, practicing good hygiene and other practices that improve hygiene.

Dhuluma za kijinsia



Fig. 8. The Mural offers insights on the various types of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), and sensitizes the on the reporting mechanisms. The mural is in Muslim, Dagoretti North Constituency. Photo taken in April 2024.

The text on the mural (Fig.7) - *Dhuluma za kijinsia* translated to English reads: Gender-Based Violence (GBV). *Tusinyamaze, Tusemezane, Tujiepushe* translated to English reads: Let's not be silent, Let's talk to each other, Let's avoid temptations. Gender-Based Violence (GBV), also known as the silent killer is an issue of concern around the world. Dagoretti is not an exception. The mural seeks to provide a voice to those who might otherwise be marginalized. Those affected are urged to speak up, while those not affected are taught how to identify potential GBV situations .

Conclusion

This study concludes by noting that social change is gradual and there are signs that it has profound effects on Dagoretti. The murals have provided a platform for artists to comment on social and political issues. The murals of Dagoretti foster community pride, identity, and belonging. The two challenges noted are that; there is no economic impact of murals in Dagoretti and there exists challenges of maintaining and preserving these murals. There is need to form and utilize partnerships with various institutions in the communities; religious, administrative and gender institutions to give opportunities for more conversations on contentious issues affecting the community.

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Joyce Omwoha, PhD is a Lecturer at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at The Technical University of Kenya. Her research areas of interest are: Media, Citizenship and Identity, Peacebuilding, Gender Studies, Health Communication and the analysis of the Social Media Culture in Kenya and beyond.

email: Joyce.Omwoha@tukenya.ac.ke joyeomwoha@gmail.com